

Red Terror

This article is about Red Terror in Russia. For other uses, see [Red Terror \(disambiguation\)](#).

The **Red Terror** was a campaign of mass killings, torture, and systematic oppression conducted by the Bolsheviks after the beginning of the [Russian Civil War](#) in 1918. Soviet historiography describes the Red Terror as having been officially announced in September 1918 by [Yakov Sverdlov](#) and ending about October 1918. However, the term was frequently applied to political repression during the whole period of the Civil War (1918–1922).^{[1][2]} The [Cheka](#) (the Bolshevik secret police)^[3] conducted the mass repressions.^[4] Estimates for the total number of people killed in the Red Terror range from 10,000 and 15,000,^[5] to 50,000^{[6][7]} to 140,000^{[7][8]} to over one and a half million.^[9]

1 Purpose

The original Red Terror was a wartime campaign against perceived [counter-revolutionaries](#) during the Russian Civil War of 1918–1921, targeting those who sided with the Whites. Leon Trotsky described the context in 1920:

The severity of the proletarian dictatorship in Russia, let us point out here, was conditioned by no less difficult circumstances [i.e. than the French Revolution]. There was one continuous front, on the north and south, in the east and west. Besides the Russian White Guard armies of Kolchak, Denikin and others, there are those attacking Soviet Russia, simultaneously or in turn: Germans, Austrians, Czecho-Slovaks, Serbs, Poles, Ukrainians, Roumanians, French, British, Americans, Japanese, Finns, Estonians, Lithuanians ... In a country throttled by a blockade and strangled by hunger, there are conspiracies, risings, terrorist acts, and destruction of roads and bridges.

— Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*^[10]

He then went on to contrast the terror with the revolution and provide the Bolshevik's justification for it:

The first conquest of power by the Soviets at the beginning of November 1917 (new style)

was actually accomplished with insignificant sacrifices. The Russian bourgeoisie found itself to such a degree estranged from the masses of the people, so internally helpless, so compromised by the course and the result of the war, so demoralized by the regime of Kerensky, that it scarcely dared show any resistance. ... A revolutionary class which has conquered power with arms in its hands is bound to, and will, suppress, rifle in hand, all attempts to tear the power out of its hands. Where it has against it a hostile army, it will oppose to it its own army. Where it is confronted with armed conspiracy, attempt at murder, or rising, it will hurl at the heads of its enemies an unsparing penalty.

— Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*^[10]

Martin Latsis, chief of the Ukrainian [Cheka](#), stated in the newspaper *Red Terror*:

Do not look in the file of incriminating evidence to see whether or not the accused rose up against the Soviets with arms or words. Ask him instead to which class he belongs, what is his background, his education, his profession. These are the questions that will determine the fate of the accused. That is the meaning and essence of the Red Terror.

— Martin Latsis, *Red Terror*^[11]

The bitter struggle was described succinctly from the Bolshevik point of view by Grigory Zinoviev in mid-September 1918:

To overcome our enemies we must have our own socialist militarism. We must carry along with us 90 million out of the 100 million of Soviet Russia's population. As for the rest, we have nothing to say to them. They must be annihilated.

— Grigory Zinoviev, 1918^[12]

2 History

The campaign of mass repressions officially started as retribution for the assassination (17 August 1918) of Petrograd Cheka leader Moisei Uritsky by Leonid Kanguissar and for the attempted assassination (30 August 1918) of Lenin by Fanni Kaplan. While recovering from his wounds, Lenin instructed: "It is necessary – secretly and *urgently* to prepare the terror".^[13] Even before the assassinations, Lenin had sent telegrams "to introduce mass terror" in Nizhny Novgorod in response to a suspected civilian uprising there, and to "crush" landowners in Penza, who resisted sometimes violently, the requisitioning of their grain by military detachments:^[2]

"Comrades! The kulak uprising in your five districts must be crushed without pity ... You must make example of these people. (1) Hang (I mean hang publicly, so that people see it) at least 100 kulaks, rich bastards, and known bloodsuckers. (2) Publish their names. (3) Seize all their grain. (4) Single out the hostages per my instructions in yesterday's telegram. Do all this so that for miles around people see it all, understand it, tremble, and tell themselves that we are killing the bloodthirsty kulaks and that we will continue to do so ... Yours, Lenin. P.S. Find tougher people."

The Bolshevik communist government executed five hundred "representatives of overthrown classes" immediately after the assassination of Uritsky.^[3]

The first official announcement of a Red Terror, published in *Izvestiya*, "Appeal to the Working Class" on 3 September 1918, called for the workers to "crush the hydra of counterrevolution with massive terror! ... anyone who dares to spread the slightest rumor against the Soviet regime will be arrested immediately and sent to concentration camp".^[2] There followed the decree "On Red Terror", issued on 5 September 1918 by the Cheka. On 15 October, the leading Chekist Gleb Bokii, summing up the officially ended Red Terror, reported that in Petrograd 800 alleged enemies had been shot and another 6,229 imprisoned.^[13] Casualties in the first two months were between 10,000 and 15,000 based on lists of summarily executed people published in newspaper *Cheka Weekly* and other official press. A declaration *About the Red Terror* by the Sovnarkom on 5 September 1918 stated:

...that for empowering the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission in the fight with the counter-revolution, profiteering and corruption and making it more methodical, it is necessary to direct there possibly bigger number of the responsible party comrades, that it is necessary to secure the Soviet Republic from the

class enemies by way of isolating them in concentration camps, that all people are to be executed by fire squad who are connected with the White Guard organizations, conspiracies and mutinies, that it is necessary to publicize the names of the executed as well as the reasons of applying to them that measure.^{[14][15][16][17]}

As the Russian Civil War progressed, significant numbers of prisoners, suspects and hostages were executed because they belonged to the "possessing classes". Numbers are recorded for cities occupied by the Bolsheviks:

In Kharkov there were between 2,000 and 3,000 executions in February–June 1919, and another 1,000–2,000 when the town was taken again in December of that year; in Rostov-on-Don, approximately 1,000 in January 1920; in Odessa, 2,200 in May–August 1919, then 1,500–3,000 between February 1920 and February 1921; in Kiev, at least 3,000 in February–August 1919; in Ekaterinodar, at least 3,000 between August 1920 and February 1921; In Armavir, a small town in Kuban, between 2,000 and 3,000 in August–October 1920. The list could go on and on.^[18]

In the Crimea, Béla Kun and Rosalia Zemlyachka, with Vladimir Lenin's approval,^[19] had 50,000 White prisoners of war and civilians summarily executed via shooting or hanging after the defeat of general Pyotr Nikolayevich Wrangel at the end of 1920. They had been promised amnesty if they would surrender.^[20] This is one of the largest massacres in the Civil War.^[21]

On 16 March 1919, all military detachments of the Cheka were combined in a single body, the Troops for the Internal Defense of the Republic, which numbered 200,000 in 1921. These troops policed labor camps, ran the Gulag system, conducted requisitions of food, and put down peasant rebellions, riots by workers, and mutinies in the Red Army (which was plagued by desertions).^[2]

One of the main organizers of the Red Terror for the Bolshevik government was 2nd-Grade Army Commissar Yan Karlovich Berzin (1889–1938), whose real name was Kyuzis Peteris. He took part in the October Revolution of 1917 and afterwards worked in the central apparatus of the Cheka.^[4] During the Red Terror, Berzin initiated the system of taking and shooting hostages^[4] to stop desertions and other "acts of disloyalty and sabotage". As chief of a special department of the Latvian Red Army (later the 15th Army), Berzin played a part in the suppression of the Russian sailors' mutiny at Kronstadt in March 1921.^[4] He particularly distinguished himself in the course of the pursuit, capture, and killing of captured sailors.^[4]

2.1 Repressions



“Bolshevik freedom” – Polish propaganda poster with nude caricature of Leon Trotsky from the Polish-Soviet War

2.1.1 Peasants

The Internal Troops of the Cheka and the Red Army practised the terror tactics of taking and executing numerous hostages, often in connection with desertions of forcefully mobilized peasants. According to Orlando Figes, more than 1 million people deserted from the Red Army in 1918, around 2 million people deserted in 1919, and almost 4 million deserters escaped from the Red Army in 1921.^[22] Around 500,000 deserters were arrested in 1919 and close to 800,000 in 1920 by Cheka troops and special divisions created to combat desertions.^[23] Thousands of deserters were killed, and their families were often taken hostage. According to Lenin's instructions,

After the expiration of the seven-day deadline for deserters to turn themselves in, punishment must be increased for these incorrigible traitors to the cause of the people. Families and anyone found to be assisting them in any way whatsoever are to be considered as hostages and treated accordingly.^[24]

In September 1918, in just twelve provinces of Russia, 48,735 deserters and 7,325 bandits were arrested, 1,826

were killed and 2,230 were executed. A typical report from a Cheka department stated:

Yaroslavl Province, 23 June 1919. The uprising of deserters in the *Petropavlovskaya volost* has been put down. The families of the deserters have been taken as hostages. When we started to shoot one person from each family, the Greens began to come out of the woods and surrender. Thirty-four deserters were shot as an example.^[25]

Estimates suggest that during the suppression of the Tambov Rebellion of 1920-1921, around 100,000 peasant rebels and their families were imprisoned or deported and perhaps 15,000 executed.^[26]

This campaign marked the beginning of the Gulag, and some scholars have estimated that 70,000 were imprisoned by September 1921 (this number excludes those in several camps in regions that were in revolt, such as Tambov). Conditions in these camps led to high mortality rates, and “repeated massacres” took place. The Cheka at the *Kholmogory* camp adopted the practice of drowning bound prisoners in the nearby *Dvina* river.^[27] Occasionally, entire prisons were “emptied” of inmates via mass shootings prior to abandoning a town to White forces.^{[28][29]}

2.1.2 Industrial workers

On 16 March 1919, Cheka stormed the *Putilov* factory. More than 900 workers who went to a strike were arrested, of whom more than 200 were executed without trial during the next few days. Numerous strikes took place in the spring of 1919 in cities of *Tula*, *Orel*, *Tver*, *Ivanovo* and *Astrakhan*. Starving workers sought to obtain food rations matching those of Red Army soldiers. They also demanded the elimination of privileges for Bolsheviks, freedom of the press, and free elections. The Cheka mercilessly suppressed all strikes, using arrests and executions.^[27]

In the city of Astrakhan, strikers and Red Army soldiers who joined them were loaded onto barges and then thrown by the hundreds into the *Volga* with stones around their necks. Between 2,000 and 4,000 were shot or drowned between 12 and 14 March 1919. In addition, the repression also claimed the lives of some 600 to 1,000 of the bourgeoisie. Archival documents indicate this was the largest massacre of workers by the Bolsheviks before the suppression of the *Kronstadt* rebellion.^[28]

However, strikes continued. Lenin had concerns about the tense situation regarding workers in the *Ural* region. On 29 January 1920, he sent a telegram to *Vladimir Smirnov* stating “I am surprised that you are taking the matter so lightly, and are not immediately executing large numbers of strikers for the crime of sabotage”.^[29]

3 Atrocities



Excavation of a mass grave outside the headquarters of the Kharkov Cheka

At these times, there were numerous reports that Cheka interrogators utilized torture methods which were, according to **Orlando Figes**, “matched only by the Spanish Inquisition.”^[30] At Odessa the Cheka tied White officers to planks and slowly fed them into furnaces or tanks of boiling water; in **Kharkiv**, scalpings and hand-flayings were commonplace: the skin was peeled off victims’ hands to produce “gloves”; the **Voronezh** Cheka rolled naked people around in barrels studded internally with nails; victims were crucified or stoned to death at Dnipropetrovsk; the Cheka at **Kremenchuk** impaled members of the clergy and buried alive rebelling peasants; in **Orel**, water was poured on naked prisoners bound in the winter streets until they became living ice statues; in **Kiev**, Chinese Cheka detachments placed rats in iron tubes sealed at one end with wire netting and the other placed against the body of a prisoner, with the tubes being heated until the rats gnawed through the victim’s body in an effort to escape.^[31]

Executions took place in prison cellars or courtyards, or occasionally on the outskirts of town, during the Red Terror and **Russian civil war**. After the condemned were stripped of their clothing and other belongings, which were shared among the Cheka executioners, they were either machine-gunned in batches or dispatched individually with a revolver. Those killed in prison were usually shot in the back of the neck as they entered the execution cellar, which became littered with corpses and soaked with blood. Victims killed outside the town were moved by truck, bound and gagged, to their place of execution, where they sometimes were made to dig their own graves.^[32]

According to **Edvard Radzinsky**, “it became a common practice to take a husband hostage and wait for his wife to come and purchase his life with her body”.^[3] During **Decossackization**, there were massacres, according to historian **Robert Gellately**, “on an unheard of scale.” The **Pyatigorsk** Cheka organized a “day of Red Terror” to execute 300 people in one day, and took quotas from each part of town. According to the Chekist **Karl Lander**, the Cheka in **Kislovodsk**, “for lack of a better idea,” killed all the patients in the hospital. In October 1920 alone

more than 6,000 people were executed. Gellately adds that Communist leaders “sought to justify their ethnic-based massacres by incorporating them into the rubric of the ‘class struggle’”.^[33]

Members of the clergy were subjected to particularly brutal abuse. According to documents cited by the late **Alexander Yakovlev**, then head of the Presidential Committee for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression, priests, monks and nuns were crucified, thrown into cauldrons of boiling tar, scalped, strangled, given Communion with melted lead and drowned in holes in the ice.^[34] An estimated 3,000 were put to death in 1918 alone.^[34]

4 Interpretations by historians

Some historians such as **Stephane Courtois** and **Richard Pipes** have argued that the Bolsheviks needed to use terror to stay in power because they lacked popular support.^{[2][35]} Although the Bolsheviks dominated among workers, soldiers and in their revolutionary soviets, they won less than a quarter of the popular vote in elections for the **Constituent Assembly** held soon after the October Revolution, since they commanded much less support among the peasantry (though the Constituent Assembly elections predated the split between the **Right SRs**, who had opposed the Bolsheviks, and the **Left SRs**, who were their coalition partners. Consequentially many peasant votes intended for the latter went to the SRs).^{[36][37][38]} Massive strikes by Russian workers were “mercilessly” suppressed during the Red Terror.^[36]

According to **Richard Pipes**, violence was implicit in Marxism itself. He has argued that terror inevitably resulted from what Lenin saw as a Marxist belief that human lives are expendable in the cause of building Communism. He quoted Marx: “The present generation resembles the Jews whom Moses led through the wilderness. It must not only conquer a new world, it must also perish in order to make a room for the people who are fit for a new world”.^{[35][39]} In 1848 Marx, commenting on a failed **Vienna Uprising**, wrote: “*there is only one way in which the murderous death agonies of the old society and the bloody birth throes of the new society can be shortened, simplified and concentrated, and that way is revolutionary terror*”.^[40] **Edvard Radzinsky** noted that **Joseph Stalin** wrote a *nota bene*: “Terror is the quickest way to new society” aside of the above quote in Kautsky’s book, *Terrorism and Communism*.^[3]

Robert Conquest was convinced that “unprecedented terror must seem necessary to ideologically motivated attempts to transform society massively and speedily, against its natural possibilities.”^[36]

Orlando Figes’ view was that Red Terror was implicit, not so much in Marxism itself, but in the tumultuous violence of the **Russian Revolution**. He noted that there were

a number of Bolsheviks, led by Lev Kamenev, Nikolai Bukharin and M. S. Olminsky, who criticized the actions and warned that thanks to “Lenin’s violent seizure of power and his rejection of democracy... [t]he Bolsheviks [would be] forced to turn increasingly to terror to silence their political critics and subjugate a society they could not control by other means.”^[41] “The Terror erupted from below. It was an integral element of the social revolution from the start. The Bolsheviks encouraged but did not create this mass terror.”^[42]

The German Marxist Karl Kautsky pleaded with Lenin against using violence as a form of terrorism, because it was indiscriminate, intended to frighten the civilian population, and included the taking and executing hostages. “Among the phenomena for which Bolshevism has been responsible, terrorism, which begins with the abolition of every form of freedom of the Press, and ends in a system of wholesale execution, is certainly the most striking and the most repellent of all”.^[43]

In *The Black Book of Communism*, Nicolas Werth contrasts the Red and White terrors, noting the former was the official policy of the Bolshevik government:

The Bolshevik policy of terror was more systematic, better organized, and targeted at whole social classes. Moreover, it had been thought out and put into practice before the outbreak of the civil war. The White Terror was never systematized in such a fashion. It was almost invariably the work of detachments that were out of control, and taking measures not officially authorized by the military command that was attempting, without much success, to act as a government. If one discounts the pogroms, which Denikin himself condemned, the White Terror most often was a series of reprisals by the police acting as a sort of military counterespionage force. The Cheka and the Troops for the Internal Defense of the Republic were a structured and powerful instrument of repression of a completely different order, which had support at the highest level from the Bolshevik regime.^[44]

James Ryan points out that Lenin never advocated for the physical extermination of the entire bourgeoisie as a class, just the execution of those who were actively involved in opposing and undermining Bolshevik rule.^[45] He did intend to bring about “the overthrow and complete abolition of the bourgeoisie,” but through non-violent political and economic means.^[46] Ryan goes on to note that “to physically annihilate the bourgeoisie as a class was certainly not something that a Marxist could support.”^[45]

5 Historical significance

The Red Terror was significant as the first of numerous Communist terror campaigns that followed in Russia and many other countries.^[47] It also unleashed the Russian Civil War according to historian Richard Pipes.^[35] Menshevik Julius Martov wrote about Red Terror:

The beast has licked hot human blood. The man-killing machine is brought into motion ... But blood breeds blood ... We witness the growth of the bitterness of the civil war, the growing bestiality of men engaged in it.^{[48][49]}

The term 'Red Terror' came to refer to other campaigns of violence carried out by communist or communist-affiliated groups.

Examples of the usage of the term “Red Terrors” include the following:

- **The Hungarian Red Terror:** The executions of 590 people accused of involvement in the counterrevolutionary *coup* against the Hungarian Soviet Republic on 24 June 1919.
- **The Spanish Red Terror** during the Spanish Civil War.
- **The Red Terror in Greece** during the Greek Resistance and the Greek Civil War.^[50]
- **The Ethiopian Red Terror** during Mengistu Haile Mariam's rule.
- In China, Mao Zedong wrote: “Red terror ought to be our reply to these counter-revolutionaries. We must, especially in the war zones and in the border areas, deal immediately, swiftly with every kind of counter-revolutionary activity.”^[51]
- The Nandigram violence in Nandigram, West Bengal in November 2007 was called “Red Terror” by critics of the actions by the local administration alluding at the Communist Party of India ruling in West Bengal.^[52] The situation was described as one of “Red Terror” by media.^[53]

6 See also

- **The Chekist**
- **Great Purge**
- **White Terror**
- **August Uprising**



Memorial stone to victims of the red terror in Daugavpils

- Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries (China)
- Cambodian genocide
- Lenin's Hanging Order
- Kovalevsky Forest, site of many massacres
- Mass graves in the Soviet Union
- Persecution of Christians in the Soviet Union
- Russian famine of 1921
- Shooting of the Romanov family
- Solovetsky Islands
- Terrorism and The Soviet Union
- Left-wing uprisings against the Bolsheviks

7 Notes

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[2] Nicolas Werth, Karel Bartošek, Jean-Louis Panné, Jean-Louis Margolin, Andrzej Paczkowski, Stéphane Courtois, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, Harvard University Press, 1999, hardcover, 858 pages, ISBN 0-674-07608-7

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[16] A.N.Yakovlev. "GULAG: The main directory of camps. 1918–1960". *MFD*. Moscow 2000.

[17] To the declaration for the Red Terror is 92 years (Ukrainian)

[18] *Black Book*, page 106

[19] Donald Rayfield. *Stalin and His Hangmen: The Tyrant and Those Who Killed for Him*. Random House, 2004. ISBN 0-375-50632-2 p. 83

[20] Gellately, Robert (2007). *Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler: The Age of Social Catastrophe*. Knopf. p. 72. ISBN 1-4000-4005-1.

[21] *Black Book*, page 100

[22] Orlando Figes: A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution: 1891–1924; Penguin 1998; Chapter 13; ISBN 0-14-024364-X

[23] Gellately, Robert (2007). *Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler: The Age of Social Catastrophe*. Knopf. p. 75. ISBN 1-4000-4005-1.

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[26] Figes, Orlando (1998). *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution: 1891–1924*. Penguin. p. 647. ISBN 0-14-024364-X.

[27] *Black Book*, pages 86–87.

[28] *Black Book*, page 88.

[29] *Black Book*, page 90.

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[33] Robert Gellately. *Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler: The Age of Social Catastrophe* Knopf, 2007 ISBN 1-4000-4005-1 pp. 70–71.

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8 References and further reading

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- Ryan, James (2012). *Lenin's Terror: The Ideological Origins of Early Soviet State Violence*. London: Routledge. ISBN 978-1138815681.

9 External links

- Terrorism or Communism book by Leon Trotsky on the use of Red Terror.
- Down with the Death Penalty! by Yuliy Osipovich Martov, June/July 1918
- The Record of the Red Terror by Sergei Melgunov
- More 'red terror' remains found in Russia UPI, July 19, 2010.

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10.1 Text

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